JASON Project takes students to Alaska

This year the JASON Project expedition lasted from Jan. 27 through Feb. 9, with broadcasts running in Space Center Houston's Mission Status Theater Jan. 28-30 and Feb. 6 and 7. Roundup reporter* Kendra Ceule *sat in on one of the 13 broadcasts to provide a look at the fun and excitement of the JASON project.

"Three! Two! One! JASON 13!"

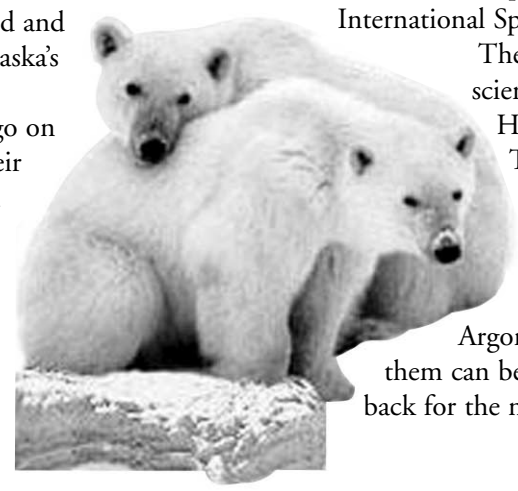
Like a belated New Year's party, the Mission Status Theater at Space Center Houston erupts in applause and cheers. More than 200 students have packed the theater, and hundreds more will come for other shows. This is no boring science field trip – this is JASON.

The JASON Project encourages kids to study science and technology by holding annual "expeditions" – two-week trips for the study of Earth's environments. A handful of students are selected every year to go on these expeditions, where they will work with top scientists to learn about Earth's life systems.

Past expeditions have allowed these students – called Argonauts – to study volcanoes in Hawaii, geysers and glaciers in Iceland and rainforests in Belize, just to name a few. This year's trip to Alaska's Seward and Portage marks the 13th expedition.

The students in the Mission Status Theater didn't get to go on this year's expedition to Alaska, but that hasn't dampened their enthusiasm. They've been studying the state's flora and fauna using JASON curriculum materials all year, and this is their payoff: A trip to Space Center Houston for a live satellite broadcast from the actual Argonauts and scientists.

Nearly 2,000 students from 34 schools in the Houston area will participate in one or more of the broadcasts. Since the broadcasts are live, each one is different.



In Alaska, a sea lion named Sugar waddles up to the camera for an unplanned close-up. The students laugh, along with the hundreds of students elsewhere in the nation who are also watching. There are dozens of broadcast sites nationally that allow students to interact with the expedition.

Johnson Space Center's Teague Auditorium had been a broadcast site since 1993, but this year it was moved to Space Center Houston due to increased security at JSC.

Education outreach coordinator Debbie Herrin doesn't mind the location change. She acts as a master of ceremonies for these interactive broadcasts, and says she likes the exciting atmosphere of Space Center Houston.

"OK, everybody clap if you think the answer is B!" Herrin says, and pockets of applause erupt. The students have just answered a multiple-choice quiz question, and their response is sent electronically to the Alaska team.

"Looks like seven broadcast sites got that one right! Way to go!" says Dr. Bob Ballard, live from Seward. Ballard, oceanographer and founder of JASON, is a personal friend of astronaut Bill Shepherd, who commanded Expedition 1.

But JSC's ties to the JASON Project don't end there: the eleventh JASON expedition, "Going to Extremes," was held at the Center in March 2000. Argonauts met astronauts, scientists and engineers, and learned about how humans protect their bodies while exploring the extremes of space. The students also set up an experiment that is now being performed on the International Space Station.

The Alaska broadcast is wrapping up; the Argonauts and scientists begin signing off. The students at Space Center Houston applaud one last time and file out of the theater. They're all smiles, but they'll take with them more than a fun memory: They leave more interested in science and more enthusiastic about exploring the world around them.

JASON may even have inspired these wannabe-Argonauts to become astronauts one day. But for now, many of them can be heard making a more immediate request: "Can we come back for the next JASON broadcast?" ◆

More information about the JASON Project...

- Dr. Robert Ballard founded the JASON Foundation for Education in 1989. Shortly after discovering the submerged wreckage of the Titanic, Dr. Ballard realized the enormous potential impact of providing students with meaningful exposure to practicing scientists and scientific discovery.
- With the assistance of partners from the scientific, government, private, educational and industrial community, Dr. Ballard pioneered the creation of telecommunication centers across the country and the dream to bring students along on his expeditions became a reality.
- Today, millions of students and teachers are exposed to the JASON Project. Each year JASON explores a different part of planet Earth in search of answers to the questions:
  - What are nature's dynamic systems?
  - How do these systems affect life?
  - What technologies do we use to study these systems and why?
- The JASON Project is an interdisciplinary program based on the National Science and Geography Standards. It integrates video programming, satellite transmissions, classroom activities and instruction, and extensive online opportunities to expose students to real science and exploration.
- Through a hands-on, inquiry driven learning experience that includes a live two-week satellite expedition, JASON inspires teachers to try new teaching techniques and effectively engages students in active learning.
- The JASON Project is an exemplary multimedia, science education project that promises to spark the imagination of students and change the way teachers are teaching.
- The Mission of The JASON Foundation for Education is to "inspire in students a lifelong passion to pursue learning in science, math and technology through exploration and discovery."
- To learn more about the JASON Project, please visit www.jasonproject.org